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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 001545

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STATE FOR NEA/FO, NEA/IPA AND NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

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SUBJECT: ABBAS STOPS IN TUNIS TO SEEK PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR
ANNAPOLIS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas stopped in Tunis on November 29 and 30 to brief the GOT, Palestinian leaders and the diplomatic corps on the Annapolis conference and next steps for the peace process. According to Palestinian Ambassador Salman al-Harthy, Abbas came to Tunisia in order to garner public support from a friendly Arab state. Al-Harthy said that Abbas, who met twice with President Ben Ali, was very pleased with the "fruitful and constructive" visit. On Annapolis, Abbas told resident ambassadors on November 29 that negotiations would be difficult, but that Annapolis presented an opportunity that "must be seized." He said all involved would do their best to reach a final settlement before the end of President Bush's term in 2008. End Summary.

WHY TUNIS?

12. (C) Abbas, who was resident in Tunisia for over ten years before Oslo, regularly visits Tunisia to meet with President Ben Ali, Farouq Qaddoumi and other Fatah Central Committee officials, and to check on his personal investments. However, in this case, Palestinian Ambassador al-Harthy told the Ambassador on November 30 that Abbas chose Tunisia specifically to garner positive and public Arab support for the start of negotiations. Ben Ali and the GOT spared no effort to do so, with an official state welcome, two tete-a-tete meetings between the Presidents, and significant positive press coverage. The visit was more noteworthy as November 29 is International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, a date Ben Ali always marks by voicing his support for a "just and lasting peace."

ANNAPOLIS

13. (SBU) During a November 29 briefing to the diplomatic corps, Abbas gave an overview of the preparations for, content of and follow-on steps from the Annapolis Conference. Abbas was accompanied by Ahmed Qureia and Nabil Shaath, who acted as an interpreter. Abbas noted that since President Bush announced the conference in July, the Palestinian side had focused on determining, in coordination with the United States and Israel, what the conference would achieve. Abbas said that initially the two sides had discussed final status issues, but the parties decided to focus on what they could hope to achieve at Annapolis: starting the peace process. As the joint statement announced by President Bush clearly

stated, the goals were the start of negotiations and the future work plan. Abbas added that Annapolis is an important step, as the Palestinians had been calling for an international conference for 30 years. Now that we have it, we must seize the opportunity, as we are in "dire need" of peace, he said.

AND ON TO PEACE

¶4. (SBU) Abbas said that now the two sides will focus on the implementation of Phase One of the Road Map. That is, the Israeli, Palestinian, joint Israeli-Palestinian and international community's commitments. Abbas outlined the Israeli obligations, then turned to the Palestinian obligation to undertake security reform. He stressed that this was not simply an obligation, but rather a Palestinian national interest. Abbas pledged to achieve this goal within two months. He said the Palestinians and Israelis had made some progress on these issues before Annapolis, but further steps must be taken as outlined in the Road Map. He added that the two sides would rely on existing documents, including the Road Map, Madrid principles, various UN Security Council Resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and President Bush's own vision. A second achievement from Annapolis, said Abbas, was the creation of a tripartite (US, Israeli, Palestinian) commission to oversee the implementation of these commitments.

¶5. (SBU) Abbas then turned to upcoming events, noting that beginning on December 12 the two sides would create working groups, led by Qureia and Livni, to discuss final status issues: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security and water.

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They will be tough and difficult negotiations, said Abbas, but both sides will try their best to resolve them before the end of President Bush's term. The success of the negotiations depends on those involved. "We need independence, security and quality of life for our people," said Abbas, while Israel needs security. A fair peace and normalization of relations between Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims on one hand and Israel on the other is the ultimate goal, Abbas concluded.

US AND INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

¶6. (SBU) During his 30 minute presentation, Abbas stressed that the US Administration and President Bush are serious about obtaining a fair settlement to the conflict. During bilateral and trilateral meetings with President Bush on November 28, Abbas said it was clear that future steps will be fair. Abbas added that the international support demonstrated at Annapolis will be important politically and economically, noting the Paris Donor Conference in December.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Surprisingly absent from Abbas' two day visit was apparently a meeting with Farouq Qaddoumi. Without offering specifics, the Palestinian Ambassador did note Abbas met with other prominent Palestinians resident in Tunis. If the absence of a Qaddoumi meeting represented any failure on Abbas' part to gain wider Palestinian support, the GOT's warm embrace seems to have left Abbas satisfied the stop was worthwhile. For Ben Ali, the visit provided an opportunity to display his pan-Arab influence to the Tunisian public. End Comment.
GODEC